

Alexander Beisel

Delenda Est

Jim introduced them to the game eight years ago. When they were kids, really. And ever since, Adam and Nate had done their best to beat him at it. The tradition was older than Elise and Jim's marriage. She'd never take that away from him.

"What's it called?" Elise hated the game.

"You know what it's called," Jim said.

"I can never say it right." She hated that he had something like this.

"Casus Belli. It's Latin—'an act of war.'"

Elise watched as Jim unfurled a map across the kitchen table. He smoothed the folds with the palms of his hands. He'd made it himself. Every location rendered in perfect detail. Each line drawn out with a nib-pen. Black and red ink. He'd used cold-press paper and stained it sepia with teabags. Burned the edges. It was systematically destroyed to make it perfect.

"Map looks nice." Elise had showed him how. She was the artist. She didn't expect it to look so nice. Jim always ignored her expertise. But with this he'd followed her advice to the letter. It looked real. Something you'd see in a museum.

Jim didn't answer her. He centered the map under the kitchen light. When it was just so he placed a twenty-sided die at each corner. Elise picked one up and rolled it across the map. Jim snatched it before it landed on a clean facing.

"You said you didn't want to play." Jim leaned on the table and turned to her. He'd make this face at her. Purse his lips and shift his eyes to the ceiling. She thought it was cute before she learned to translate it: *I love you but you're pissing me off.*

"I *don't* want to play." Elise hated that face now. She hated that her husband could put so much effort into something so fleeting. It was a game—little figures and dice and him a grown man. He'd take off work and set aside a weekend a month to play it. And Adam and Nate did too. She hated those two. She hated that once a month Adam and Nate took over her home. They stole her house and her quiet and her husband. But that wasn't true. Jim gave himself to it. To them. To this stupid game.

"Okay then," Jim said. "Then let *us* play."

"I just don't understand it. What's the point?" she asked.

"The point is to conquer, Elise." Jim threw a handful of dice across the table. He smiled at the result. It meant nothing to her. She'd seen empires forged by snake-eyes and armies routed by boxcars.

"How? It's just a bunch of little figures and dice." Elise tried to disguise her curiosity. She'd played before. Before they were married. She didn't understand it then. She didn't hate it then either.

"Look, you've played before." Jim motioned to his miniature infantry line. "Each player plays a general from history—I'm Marcus Atilius Regulus, Adam is Xanthippus and Nate is Hiero II." He said the names like they were family members. As though she'd remember them from her wedding. Their wedding.

"Each player has an army," Jim continued, "and you fight it out—"

“But they don’t actually fight—you just roll dice!” She laughed.

“Yeah, and the hat token in monopoly doesn’t *actually* buy Boardwalk.” Jim said. *I love you but you’re pissing me off.* “It’s a game and it’s fun and you said you didn’t want to play.”

“I don’t.”

The doorbell rang.

“That’s them!” Jim shot up from the table.

Elise stayed in the kitchen. Her husband’s toys were all set in rank and file. They were little Romans. Painted soldiers all posed like they were in the fray of some important battle. She looked for the two she’d painted for him. She couldn’t find them. He left the rulebook in his empty chair. It was open. There were numbers and charts. Words she didn’t understand. The opposite page was a splash-frame of Julius Caesar. Beneath it, a quote.

In war, events of importance are the result of trivial causes.

Just like the game, she thought. No matter what you “conquer,” it all goes back in the box. She could hear Jim answering the door.

“Fella’s! Welcome—welcome.” Jim held the door open and let Nate and Adam pass into the kitchen. They each wore backpacks and carried stacked boxes they kept in place under their chins. They set their things down carefully. The kitchen looked like army camp now.

“Hey guys.” Elise hated Nate and Adam.

“Elise! How are you?” Nate was Jim’s best man at their wedding. Whenever he could, he’d speak only in movie quotes. At their wedding Nate explained to the DJ “I’m The Dude—so that’s what you call me.

That or His Dudeness or Duder or el Duderino if you're not into the whole brevity thing." Jim would laugh. He always seemed to know the movie.

"Elise—you look great!" Adam was their officiant. She thought she'd like him when Jim told her he was a minister but an interfaith minister. When Jim first introduced them, Adam told her "excommunicates, homos, tranns, I'll marry anyone the church won't." And then he laughed.

There was a life before her, Elise knew. And she couldn't be a part of it. Never would be.

Jim walked slowly back into the kitchen.

"Take a look at that map, fellas," he said. Adam and Nate were careful not to touch anything. They didn't pick up the twenty-sided dice. They didn't move it from the light. How'd they know not to touch it?

"This is fucking unbelievable!" Adam said.

"Really ties the room together."

"Yup—don't mind the sepia—it's all going to be red by the end of this." Jim smiled. Adam and Nate scoffed. She didn't think people really did that.

"Red like...blood?" she asked.

The three of them turned.

"No. Like Rome," Jim answered. As if it were obvious.

Jim offered each of them a beer. They accepted and began unpacking their things. Jim stayed with his coffee.

Elise watched as Adam and Nate opened their respective kits. Egg crate foam swaddled hundreds of little toy soldiers. They had rulers and protractors and dice. Their backpacks were stuffed with books marked *Casus Belli*.

“Did you guys bring any clothes?” Elise asked. Nate set a miniature chariot on the table and moved it slightly to the left.

“Clothes?” He moved it back, deciding it was fine where it was. Adam answered in a way the other two seemed to accept readily.

“What for?” he asked. “Are we going out?” He pulled a foam sheet from his box. There was something underneath it. “Oh! Did I send you guys the pictures of this?” It was a miniature war-elephant complete with a turret and archers. He held it under the light for them to examine. Jim and Nate marveled at it.

“Holy shit, man! That’s amazing!”

“Really nice, Dude.”

Jim took it carefully from Adam.

“Shit—you even painted the archer’s eyes?” Jim was stunned.

“How long did that take?” Nate was impressed.

“Not too long, actually.” Adam was lying. She could tell just by looking at it. It took days. He must have used triple zero brushes. At least three layers of undercoats. Another twenty in highlighting. All under that magnifying headlamp that mimicked natural light. He mentioned it to her once. “Presents colors as they would be seen in ‘real life.’” She never used one. Her colors *were* in real life.

“Elise—look at this.” Jim offered the elephant to her. When she tried to take it he reminded her to only *look* at it.

“A lot of detail.” And there really was. He’s an artist but not like me, she thought. He could paint these little toys well but not in the way she could paint murals and portraits. She actually got paid for her work—had people appreciate it and buy it and commission it. This was just a toy.

Nate used a straightedge to position his spearmen in a perfect line. When they were ordered to his liking, he drew out a roster he’d made detailing the statistics of his varied units.

“Jim—did you decide on a campaign?” Adam bent to the table so as to see Nate’s army at eye level.

“Yessir,” Jim said. “Sicilian.”

“Which war?”

“First one.”

Nate laughed. “This aggression will not stand, man.”

“You fuckers are done.” Adam motioned to his prized elephant. “Donzo.”

Elise looked at it one more time. It was marvelous on the table. It towered over the other armies. Fierce and proud. And dangerous.

“What’s the naval operation?”

“Late—I’m using Corvus. Delenda est, bitches.”

Nate and Adam groaned. That meant something to them.

“Alright,” Elise said. “I’ll leave you boys to it.” She filled a mason jar with water at the tap.

“You working on your painting, baby?” Jim didn’t look up from the table. Too busy scouting enemy deployment.

“Yeah. You boys have fun.” She left for the sunroom.

It was ordered chaos. The walls were papered with sketches and measurements. A six-foot canvas dominated each corner of the room. All in various stages of completion. She set down the mason jar and portioned out mineral spirits and liquin. She cut the spirits with water. HP Lovecraft watched her.

She'd been working on him since Jim showed her the author's photo. He had a face so strange it needed to be painted. Shaped like pickle jar. That granite block of jaw. She'd never read his work but under her husband's advice, she'd incorporated writhing tentacles into the background to eat up the negative space. She'd painted them pink. Jim told her they should be green. They were still pink. She turned on her music and stared back at Lovecraft for a while. She dipped her fingers in the mason jar and smoothed the bristles of her brush absentmindedly. It was ox hair. Strong and yet soft. She could see every brush stroke she'd make. Every hue she'd blend. Every second it would take to make it perfect. Cobalt blue. Fast Light Yellow. A jaundiced green. Something old and ruined before its time.

She set her old step-ladder before Lovecraft and climbed to the top, but she stopped before she could touch the canvas. She could hear them over the music. She straddled the top step and turned away from Lovecraft. She looked down at the step between her legs and absently painted little smiley's on the wood face. They were a jaundiced green.

They'd been playing for four hours. The war was already being won.

"Fucking right!" Jim howled in victory. "Run, you little bitches!"

Adam groaned as the dice left his hand. They failed him miserably. Elise wandered into the kitchen using a bag of chips as her excuse.

“Did you win, baby?” She watched her twenty-eight year old husband do his best Heisman as Adam sank in his seat.

“Fucking right, I did!” Jim said.

“Yup!” Nate did his best not to laugh at Adam’s misery. “Adam’s line folded and broke under one cavalry element—one!—turned and smashed into that lovely elephant of his and that’s all she wrote.”

They were just toys and dice. How could they know all that from a three and a one? What did it matter? It all goes back in the box, anyhow.

“So is the game over?” She hoped it was. Though she knew better. Jim punched the air and praised Mars Victricus. Adam answered for him.

“Not even close,” Adam said. “Lilybaeum and Messana are still mine and Nate over here devoted his entire season to what he calls a ‘consolidation of the ground forces.’”

“I told you, man—it’s a defensive posture.” Nate said.

“It’s a *pussy* posture.” Adam laughed. “Some tyrant you are.”

“This isn’t ‘Nam. There are rules.”

The three of them laughed.

She closed the French doors behind her. Mr. Lovecraft was still staring at her. She’d fixed his jawline and added a delicate sheen to his pipe. The tentacles were still pink. She was deciding whether or not she liked them pink. The more she thought about it the more she realized they should be green.

The boys were still laughing and she could hear them through the glass. She turned her music up to fifteen before deciding it should be an even number. Fourteen.

“One cavalry element? Come on, Adam!”

“They’re new recruits, that’s all—the Sacred Band is on their way from Utica.”

“Good luck with that sea voyage. The Corvus is on the prowl!

Twelve.

Two in the morning and the war still raged. True to his word, Adam had rallied and put Rome on the back-foot, and Nate had seized the opportunity to abandon his pussy posturing. It was still just dice and paper. Right?

“I’m going to bed.” Elise leaned on Jim’s shoulder. She looked on as he rolled another handful of dice. They scattered across the table, dancing over the Mediterranean Basin.

“Okay, baby.” Jim was thoughtful. He collected the dice and examined his empire. Elise couldn’t help wonder what he was considering. She looked at Adam and Nate who were likewise thoughtful. It was just paper and pen. Some dice. And what were really just toys.

“Are you winning?” She tried to find something on the table that would answer that for her.

“Eh...” Jim said. “I’m not losing—put it that way.” He was so serious. Nervous almost. Adam and Nate were on edge, chewing on pens and thumbing through books and leaflets. She imagined their terror. Who’s he coming for next? Where will Rome turn? Greece or Carthage?

“Are Adam and Nate on a team?” she asked. Jim ignored her. Adam and Nate looked up. The thought hadn’t occurred to them.

“We should be, shouldn’t we?” Nate said, turning to Adam.

“It’s the only way, really. Neither of us can break him alone.”

“Oh thank you!” Jim turned to his wife. “Thank you for that—I thought you didn’t want to play.”

“I don’t.”

“Then *don’t*—stop fraternizing with the enemy and go to bed.” *I love you but you’re pissing me off.*

Good, she thought. She kissed him on the cheek and watched him roll one more pack of dice before heading to bed. As she ascended the steps she could hear her husband forsake the gods that once loved him.

“I’m going to paint this fucking map red. With or without Mars’ help.”

Nate and Adam laughed.

Elise woke early. She made her way down the stairs to find them at it again. Or were they still at it?

“Have you guys been to bed yet?” She moved for the coffee maker. It was fresh.

“No—not at all.” Adam sipped on his own coffee.

“How do you play that game all night?” Elise poured herself a cup and brought it to her lips. She didn’t expect an answer from them. They were too involved. She took her kitchen into account. It was a warzone. The miniatures were piled on every available surface. Field hospitals. The walls had succumbed to still more maps and notes detailing the game. Dice littered the floor. They’d gone rogue when someone had thrown them across the kitchen in a fit of despair.

The boys looked like old men. Bags under their eyes. Heads hung low in exhaustion. Adam leaned into the table. He might be winning by the look of him.

“How’s it going?”

“Well, thanks to your sage advice,” Adam said, “Rome lies in *ashes* and Carthage is on the rise.” Adam exhibited the kind of energy that comes with an all-nighter. An engine burning up the last of its fuel before sputtering to a dead stop. The last ditch effort of a metabolism run dry.

“You *burnt* Rome?” Elise asked.

“Yes, he did.” *I love you but you’re pissing me off.* “And it’s your fault, Elise.” She walked to her husband’s side and rubbed his back.

“I’m sorry, sweetheart.” She loved that he was miserable. Something so pointless and he was so worked up. It all goes back in the box, honey. She watched as Adam took up his elephant and placed it at the gates of Syracuse. Jim and Nate bowed their heads in resignation.

“In the immortal words of Darth Vader...” Adam smiled. “...All too easy.” Elise watched Nate and Jim despair. It was the absolute power of arithmetic playing before them. She saw the savage delight in Adam and the woe and fear in her husband. But not in Nate. Nate examined his notes before standing and drawing up a handful of dice.

“Fucking amateurs.” Nate reached into his box and revealed another figurine, this one painted gold.

“This is Sparta! Bitch.” Nate placed the figure before Adam’s elephant. Jim howled in shock and Adam sank back into his seat, beseeching someone named “fucking Astarte.”

“What does that mean?” She wanted it to end. She couldn’t understand how there was still hope. How there was still time. How anyone could see something other than futility at the siege of Syracuse.

“Baby—it’s the Spartans—300, you know?”

“Oh.” She knew the movie. She knew that the 300 were an immovable object. She knew that no matter what came for them, they would never yield. They would die where they stood.

“Are you going to finish your painting today?” He actually looked at her when he asked.

“What? Yeah. I think so.” The mighty 300 would hold Syracuse against the war-elephants, against the Sacred Band—against a million men if they had to.

They were staring at her.

“What?” she asked.

“Everything okay?” Jim asked.

“Nothing—yeah, I’m fine. Are you three going to sleep today?” After the war her husband would come home a different man. Jaundiced. Ruined by time. He’d be lost after this. “Will you guys take a nap at least? I’ll wake you up.”

The idea washed over them. They all realized at once how tired they were.

“That’s a good idea, actually.” Jim knew what she meant.

“Syracuse isn’t going anywhere.” Adam set his dice down.

“No, it’s not, sir. No, it’s not,” Nate said.

They laughed.

Nate and Adam slept on the couch together. They were too tired to be concerned with which parts touched. Jim stayed in the kitchen with Elise.

“I know it’s a mess, but I’ll clean it up.” He was hoping they’d have the conversation after his friends had left. Elise was angrier with herself than she was with Jim. Why should she be mad at him for having such close friends? What was the harm in him playing a stupid game? He could be doing far worse. He had done far worse. Now that he was sober, what did she have to complain about?

“I just—I don’t understand why it’s always at *our* place. Have it at Adam and Nate’s—they live together. It would be easier *there*.”

“It’s tradition—the winner always hosts the next one. Plus there’s more space here and would you really let me disappear for a weekend?”

“I don’t care! Why would I care?” She would though. She knew it, too. Elise didn’t like the idea of him leaving if he didn’t have to. That’s it, isn’t it? You don’t want to lose him to something else.

“Whatever—I’m going to lay down. Wake me in a couple hours, please.”

Jim kissed her and left the kitchen. Elise sat at the table and sipped her coffee. It wasn’t as fresh as she thought it was. Burnt. Must have been left on too long.

Mr. Lovecraft was such a strange looking man. She stared at him and the photo. The painting. Back to the photo. She’d mastered it. It was exactly him in every way. It wasn’t her fault he was shaped so strange. The tentacles surrounding him were repulsive. Phallic and sticky things that looked as if they’d tongue anyone who drew too close. And they were still pink.

“Wow. Lovecraft?” Adam asked.

“Yup. That’s him.” Elise said. She turned from the portrait and sat atop the ladder again. Adam was looking straight through her. He walked towards the painting with his mouth open slightly.

“Unbelievable, Elise—really. It’s exactly him.” They smiled at one another.

“Thanks.”

“Is it done?”

“Not yet. I have to paint the tentacles.”

“What?” Adam looked genuinely concerned. “You can’t! They look perfect!”

“Jim told me they should be green.”

“Fuck that—keep ‘em pink.”

Elise smiled. “Yeah—I just want it to be accurate, you know.”

Adam examined the painting in the way he examined his army placements. He combed over it with his eyes, careful not to touch it. He measured each brush stroke and fingerprint buried in the layers of pink paint.

“Accurate,” he huffed. “We’re talking about Cthulu here. If anything, he’d be angry that you *tried* to paint him accurately.”

“What?”

“Takes Lovecraft two pages to describe snow and water. The Cthulu shows up and he says it’s ‘indescribable.’ Pink, green—it’s a color out of space.” Adam smiled at her. “You paint it how *you* want it.”

“I’ll go wake up Jim. Is Nate awake?” She climbed down from her ladder. She felt too close to Adam.

“Eh—hey, thanks for putting us up, by the way,” Adam said. He didn’t turn from the painting. He stepped back to see it at a proper angle. “I know we’re a pain in the ass.”

“I feel like there was more to that sentence,” Elise said.

“Nope. We’re a pain in the ass. So thanks.”

Elise smiled again and left Adam to his vigil for the elder things. That’s what she called them anyway. She could never say the name right. Cthulu.

She passed Nate on her way upstairs. He lay on the couch and rubbed his eyes. He stared at book titled, Tyrants of Syracuse.

“You’re awake then?”

“Meh. Kind of,” he said, throwing down the book. “Hey, why don’t you ever play with us?”

“With you guys? No way.” Elise stopped midway up the stairs.

“Why not? We could teach you.”

“No. I don’t think so. I’ll leave the battles to the men.”

“Oh, don’t give me that!” Nate said. “There’s plenty of women generals. Boudicca, Wu Zeitian, Queen Dido...” Nate was counting them on his fingers until he realized he only knew three. “Well, there’s not many but the few there are were more badass than most of the men. Boudicca burnt Londinium *to the ground!*

“Londinium?”

“London—Joan of Arc—she was the only one man enough to lead the French. Dido *built* Carthage.”

“Good for her.” Elise ascended the stairs. Boudicca. She smiled. Joan of Arc. Dido.

“Hey, baby.” Jim was awake in the same way Nate was. She flopped on the bed next to him and kissed him. “Your boyfriends are awake.”

“Cool—cool. Did you finish your painting yet?”

“Did you finish your war yet? Don’t rush me.” They smiled.

She always woke first. She’d lie next to him while he slept and watch the sunlight paint his face. He’d wake and smile. “You’re a creep,” he’d say and she’d smile.

But she couldn’t see him that way anymore. He doesn’t see me anymore, she thought. And she knew why. He’d thrown out his old ways for her. He’d given himself to her. So much that there was nothing left of

the drunken, stupid rake she'd married. He was something else now. No longer fierce and proud. No longer dangerous.

She wanted him to touch her.

"What are you up to?" Jim said.

She saw the thing she'd built and lamented it. She wanted to hurt. She wanted struggle. She wanted bruises on her thighs.

"Baby, not now."

She wanted him to notice her. If it meant she was just a thing to him—she wanted to be his. She wanted to be used and thrown away.

"Elise—come on. The guys are downstairs."

"Fine." And she knew she was.

She couldn't work on it anymore. It was finished whether she liked it or not. She smiled to herself. It always seemed to end that way. She liked the idea. An artist had no say in the matter. A piece was done when *it* decided it was done.

Mr. Lovecraft watched her clean her ox hair brushes. The tentacles behind him seemed to squirm and fight against themselves. They were green now. He was right, she thought. She hated him for that.

The kitchen was obliterated. A war had claimed the lives of thousands and set Sicily ablaze. The map was posted on the wall now. The statues and armies and navies had all been removed. It was dominated by purple flag-pins. Jim stared at the map with his arms folded behind his head. He glared at it in disbelief. Nate and Adam were packing their belongings.

“Who won?” Elise asked.

“Carthage,” he said. He turned and smiled at her.

“That’s right!” Adam said.

“Meh.” Nate shrugged. “That’s why there were three Punic Wars.”

Elise stood by Jim and was careful not to touch him. “So it’s over?” she asked.

I love you. “For now.” *But you’re pissing me off.* “Carthage and Rome are mortal enemies.”

Jim walked Adam and Nate to the door. Elise waved from the kitchen.

“You guys take it easy,” Jim said.

“The Dude abides.”

Elise looked at the map posted to the wall. It would never end, she thought. Sicily has fallen but there’s still Italy. Africa. Spain. There was always more. It would never be enough. Nothing ever ends.

Jim dragged back into the kitchen.

“I can’t believe they beat me,” he said.

“First time for everything,” Elise said.

Jim stared at the map posted to the wall. He braced against it. Examined every detail. She could see him working it out in his head. The magnitude of it. The great fall of a greater dynasty.

“Nah,” he said. “That’s not it.”

Is he really still thinking about this, Elise thought. It’s over—you lost. And they’re gone.

“You’re weakest at the cusp of victory,” he said. He was referencing something. Elise wondered if he understood it. She couldn’t look at him anymore.

“That doesn’t make sense,” she said.

“It does once you’ve lost.”